# Centered in Equity Across the Technical Assistance Project Lifecycle

Equity is the cornerstone of our work at Abt, and we are on a generations-long journey to integrate an intersectional approach in all our internal and external projects and processes to address systemic biases and help ensure more equitable distribution of resources and wellbeing outcomes. We ground our technical assistance (TA) approach in an understanding of historical and ongoing systemic inequities. We ask at every phase: "Are we being inclusive?", "Are we sharing power to cocreate innovative solutions?", and "Are we aware of the historical and ongoing systemic and institutional inequities that inform context?"

We define cocreation as an intentional, iterative process to develop solutions with those most impacted. We develop a shared understanding of the problem, deeply listen to partners' ideas, and cooperate on making decisions.

Cocreation relies on the unique assets of team members, including partners with lived and frontline expertise, to establish just relationships by articulating shared mission and values and then incorporating those relationships to guide our processes and solutions. This requires authentic power sharing and a material shift in business-as-usual power dynamics. This approach is essential for equitable and sustainable TA and capacity building work with clients, communities, and organizations.
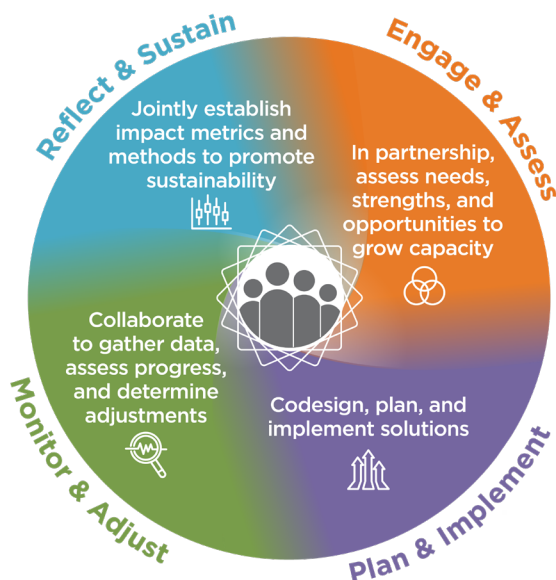
Abt's mission is to improve the quality of life and economic well-being of people worldwide.

To achieve our goal of equitable impact, Abt advances principles and practices that consider the intersectionality of a variety of individual and community experiences. They include institutional and systemic racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, anti-trans hatred, ableism, climate change, poverty, and other manifestations of injustice.

Our four phases in the TA project lifecycle are: Engage & Assess, Plan & Implement, Monitor & Adjust, and Reflect & Sustain.

We adapt Community-Based Participatory Research and Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation methods for technical solutioning. We have integrated frameworks such as Safeguarding, Localization, Human-Centered Design, and Complex Adaptive Systems. This brief highlights key considerations and frameworks our teams use.

Engaging and Assessing Inclusively and Equitably

At the start of every TA experience, we listen with humility. We *engage* because we want to understand people's current experiences, historical context, and the impetus for change. We collaborate with partners and impacted community members to jointly design assessment approaches, explore and define goals, and initiate planning. We raise and reflect on questions to determine if we are engaging and *assessing* inclusively and equitably. For example:

- Do assessment teams meaningfully include members of the community, organization, or institution that is the focus of the assessment, including individuals with lived- and/or frontline expertise?
- Does the assessment consider both the needs and the assets of the diverse individuals and the communities-within-communities the project will serve?
- Does the initial assessment promote prevention and mitigation throughout the project lifecycle by assessing environmental and systemic inequities as well as communities' strengths, assets, and opportunities that mediate processes and results?
- Does the assessment process ensure equitable community partner engagement in decision-making through clear, explicit power sharing and embedded processes that build consensus across the project lifecycle?

Reflect & Sustain — Jointly establish impact metrics and methods to promote sustainability

Engage & Assess — In partnership, assess needs, strengths, and opportunities to grow capacity

Plan & Implement — Codesign, plan, and implement solutions

Monitor & Adjust — Collaborate to gather data, assess progress, and determine adjustments

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Planning and Implementing Inclusively and Equitably

Cocreation in the *plan and implement* phase builds on a foundation of equity-centered practices and norms we develop in the *Engage & Assess* phase. In this phase, we focus on comprehensive level-setting to ensure each person has what they need to fully participate in the project. Equitable level-setting ensures that team members receive adequate orientation, acknowledgement that their partnership is valued, and resources to set them up for success. These resources can include, but are not limited to:

- **Inclusive Logistics**
  - Scheduling to meet conveniently for different time zones or times of day that don't conflict with partners' work shifts or caregiving roles
  - Providing funds for childcare, transportation, and technology support
- **Fair Compensation**
  - Paying community partners and persons with lived expertise fair market value for their contributions, in line with compensation of academic or other subject matter experts
- **Language Accessibility**
  - Providing appropriate and accurate interpretation, translation, and culturally responsive services for all meetings, materials, emails, and other communications
- **Cultural Humility**
  - Collaborating to honor the diverse cultural mores and norms of team members while ensuring we address power dynamics and promote consensus-building so all can fully participate.

Equitable participation promotes TA planning and implementation that yields the greatest impact and sets the project up for success for subsequent phases of work.

Monitoring and Adjusting Inclusively and Equitably

The third phase focuses on *monitoring* inclusively for challenges and *adjusting* to increase equitable progress. This phase provides opportunities to deepen our equity approach through continuous assessment and quality improvement efforts. In this phase, we:

1. Measure work progress against the project's goals
2. Check in with project partners and interested parties to assess communication, collaboration, cocreation, and other elements of teaming
3. Develop participatory processes to iterate and respond to diverse needs
4. Safeguard to ensure a do-no-harm approach at every step of implementation
5. Create transparent feedback loops to ensure access for and participation of all team members, partners, and interested parties so that no one is left behind
6. Internalize feedback and make appropriate adjustments and adaptations in real time to protocols, processes, and other project components.

This phase safeguards our relationships, work processes, methods for real-time review with partners, and iteration. We monitor and adjust to ensure equity and fidelity in implementation and a future orientation toward sustainable outcomes.

Principles of Safeguarding

- **Empowerment** of the most vulnerable and impacted team members and community partners to engage authentically and through transparent communication and informed consent.
- **Prevention** of adverse impacts and harmful externalities to those most at risk.
- **Proportionality** in intervention to minimize invasiveness.
- **Protection** of the most marginalized from structural and institutional harm.
- **Partnership** and power sharing with people with lived- and front-line expertise.
- **Accountability** that promotes just relationships, healing-centered communication, and ongoing trust-building.

Reflecting and Sustaining Inclusively and Equitably

Abt uses an intersectional approach for its team *reflection* and *sustainability* efforts. We start before engaging with clients, partners, and communities and embed reflection and sustainability as an essential element of the entire project lifecycle. We review all aspects of project infrastructure, staffing, programming, and operations for adherence to equitable principles, processes, and practices. In our own equity journey as the TA & I Capability Center continues to evolve and learn, our team renamed this phase from *Evaluate and Sustain* to *Reflect and Sustain* to encompass more precise language for our work.

Equitable TA means honoring our community partners' truths, including lived experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion during formal evaluation processes. In shifting away from an extractive paradigm, we commit to co-assessment: a mutually owned and designed two-way reflexive process to understand a project's performance and discuss opportunities to do better. Through facilitated collaborative inquiry, we engage with communities and fundamentally shift how we address and make meaning of problems, solutions, and change over time. Communities thus can tell their own stories and assess the impact of a process on their contexts and themselves.

The success of each phase will only be authentic, vis-à-vis equity, to the extent that it has been done well throughout. We embedded collaborative inquiry and co-assessment to help create a clear process for project close-out in this fourth phase of TA. Equity ideally is so integrated that it is no longer an add on, much less an afterthought. We value proximity to our toughest policy challenges, and that's why Abt strives to include local leadership of those most affected by policies. Their insights, Abt's expertise and resources, and hard conversations lead to cocreation of tailored solutions. We uplift localized, place-based *impacted leadership* (lived experts: those most impacted by a particular policy or program issue) by leveraging *privileged support* (expertise, time, passion, and resources).

Authenticity and honesty in relationships enable us to build toward sustainability--the ability for concrete measures to continue after resources (including project resources) shift or decrease. Reflecting and sustaining in partnership with communities ensures that communities use what they have learned for the community's benefit. They put into action: "With us, for us, by us." Grounded in localized relationships, these initiatives are likely to last. If local leaders affected by an issue lead or co-lead the work, they will have a stake in long-term outcomes.

Here are two stories of Abt staff in action around the globe, advancing equity daily to achieve our mission.

Partnering with CBOs to Include Migrants in Colombia's Health System

Since 2018, nearly 2.5 million returning Colombians and Venezuelan migrants fleeing political and economic crisis have entered the country. With the Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS), funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Abt aims to help strengthen the Colombian health system and expand access to health insurance enrollment and health services for these individuals and families.

Working with local actors, LHSS uses a collaborative, systematic, and sustainable approach to identify interventions to strengthen local capacity at the individual, organizational, and system levels. As part of an inclusive strategy, LHSS offered grants to community-based organizations (CBOs) representing the migrant population as key partners. The Abt team partnered side-by-side with them in the design and implementation of interventions and helped them strengthen their capacity.

Throughout the project, the Abt team has paid keen attention to procedural equity by co-facilitating pause and reflect sessions with our CBO partners. The team assessed the direction of activity and cocreated solutions to any challenges encountered. These sessions enabled LHSS and the CBOs to jointly modify the capacity strengthening assistance based on evidence, identify early accomplishments, document best practices, and record the sustainability of the intervention. The result: more equitable access to high quality health services for migrants.

Local Health System Sustainability Colombia project staff in a planning meeting with community partners.

To ensure the sustainability of including migrants in the health system, LHSS strengthened relationships and engagement between CBOs and local governments, developing inclusion and representation for migrant communities in policy-making processes. The improved relationship between CBOs and local governments has resulted in joint development of a guide for the inclusion of the migrant population in the health system. Key achievements for LHSS include framing migration as a health determinant, and the recognition of CBOs by local governments as co-responsible partners for promoting inclusion of migrants in the health system. Finally, building trust-based relationships has empowered migrant population leaders as key partners for the development of activities aimed at improving their access to health care.

Intentionally partnering with CBOs from the migrant community from the start and cocreating design and reflection of capacity strengthening strategies have been key for embedding equity into LHSS. Likewise, facilitating a trusting relationship between local governments and these CBOs, promoting dialogue, and improving participation of CBOs in the formulation of public policies have increased long term, localized sustainability.

Young People Experiencing Homelessness Leading the Way in Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.

Since 2017, Abt has provided planning and implementation TA to communities nationwide on behalf of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP). The purpose of YHDP is to identify innovative models that better meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, particularly those who have been excluded from existing community options.

In 2021, Abt was assigned to support Madison, WI for three years in partnership with TA firms Youth Collaboratory and True Colors United. In September 2021, Madison began the process of developing a plan to articulate key areas of system improvement and new housing and service projects to fund. HUD requires YHDP communities to have a Youth Action Board (YAB) comprising young people 24 years old and younger who have lived experience of homelessness. The YAB and other community partners play a key role in YHDP planning, grant-making, governance, and continuous quality improvement. In Abt's TA approach, we kept in mind YHDP principles of racial and LGBTQIA+ equity and authentic youth collaboration and built strong working relationships with our TA partner firms and homelessness system partners in Madison.

Nationwide, homelessness is more closely tied to racism than to poverty, substance use, or mental health both at a systemic level and in the individual discrimination people who experience homelessness face. We know that systemic racism and intersections with other forms of oppression create a cascade of harm and marginalization. This includes the over-policing and imprisonment of poor and working-class communities of color; punitive public housing authority bans on people with criminal records; the targeted removal of Black children from their families and communities; the delegitimization and under-resourcing of gender-affirming services for trans people; and

Indigenous migration from climate crises. Other structural factors compound and directly contribute to young people experiencing homelessness.

Over the past five years, HUD, Abt, and our TA partners have become more explicit in naming and addressing the ways racism contributes to youth homelessness and other inequities across the social determinants of health. Abt TA providers on behalf of HUD have developed sophisticated reporting systems to look at the longitudinal experience of people in each community's homelessness system. This makes clear who is experiencing homelessness and for how long. We also pinpoint indicators of root causes of inequity. Madison/Dane County is no exception. Black residents account for five percent of the population but 52 percent of young people experiencing homelessness. This overrepresentation is also reflected in the local child welfare system data. In addition to the extremely high over-representation of Black and Latinx young people experiencing homelessness in Madison, these youth spend much longer lengths of time in homelessness than their white peers. The YAB confirmed these trends through their lived expertise and additionally described a culture of adultism and the need to be meaningfully engaged from the onset of planning. In its first year, our TA focused on:

- Identifying and addressing white dominant culture norms in processes and interpersonal patterns to promote change across the Madison community and our TA team
- YAB members with support from True Colors United leading training on adultism: upskilling older adult partners on authentic youth collaboration and undoing bias against young people. The collective also worked to address issues with partners and in ourselves
- Establishing governance structures to empower the YAB to operate in leadership roles
- Facilitating accessible community listening sessions and equity-focused hiring and onboarding of planning staff.

After planning was completed, the YAB created a request for proposals to implement prioritized projects in the community. This was based on standard processes with the key difference being that it was written in partnership and scored by young people with lived experience of homelessness. The YAB has continued to lead as project applications have been submitted and implementation commenced. With support from Abt and our TA partners, these young leaders radically shifted the culture

Madison Youth Action Board Members and True Colors United TA partner, smiling as group during on-site meeting.

of their local homelessness ecosystem by having an authentically empowered youth/majority Black leadership structure representative of young people experiencing homelessness in their community. They were able to name concerns with status quo approaches and led the community in making meaningful changes. Funding partners supported the board in an admittedly uncomfortable process to pause, discuss problems, and take the time needed to engage in a more collaborative process. Abt looks forward to continuing to support these young leaders in creating equitable and sustainable systems change.

Thank you to our authors and contributors for the project examples, LHSS Colombia: Jonathan Cali and Carlos Dinkel Salazar; and YHDP Madison: Whitney Patterson and Aubrey Sitler from Abt, the Madison Youth Action Board, and our TA partners Roy Graham from Youth Collaboratory and Tiffany Hart from True Colors United.

January 2023